

Some Remarks on the Transmission of the Kayanian Heroic Cycle

By MARY BOYCE

The great increase achieved in this century in the knowledge of oral literatures, both through the gathering of fresh material and through analytic study, makes it no longer possible to seek the origins of epic in 'les formes rudes et naïves de la ballade historique'¹ or in a tradition 'formée librement par le peuple sous les anciennes dynasties'². Theories of popular authorship have had to be abandoned, both for epic and ballad; and even where these two types of literature share their subject-matter, differences not only of date but also of form and function have led to their being regarded as constituting separate literary categories³. Epic poetry, elaborate and formal in character, appears to have flourished generally in an aristocratic setting, since, at the epochs when it was composed, the knowledge and leisure for its cultivation were scarcely to be found outside the houses of the great⁴. These epochs seem to have been the different periods in various countries when society was in the state defined as 'the heroic age'⁵. It is clear, however, that heroic poetry often outlives the death of the society that gave it birth, chance or merit having rescued certain poems or cycles of poems from the oblivion that generally overtakes an abandoned oral literature. In the case of the Iranian material relating to the Kayanians, the chance appears to have been the conversion of the last of their reigning princes, Vištaspa, to Zoroastrianism. The importance of this fact has led to the view being not infrequently expressed that it was through the Zoroastrian sacred books themselves that the heroic tradition came to be preserved⁶; but

¹ J. Mohl, *Le Livre des Rois* (1876), Vol. i, p. iv. ² *ibid.*, p. xxxix; considerably later, J. C. Coyajee suggested a popular ballad-character for the heroic literature of the Parthian era; see *JASB.*, 1932, xxviii, no. 10, pp. 208, 209. ³ See, e. g., W. J. Entwistle, *European Balladry* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 16—32, 56—71, 90—108; C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), p. 39. ⁴ See H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912), p. 83; H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, vol. i (Cambridge, 1932), pp. 64—70; vol. iii (1940), pp. 884—5. ⁵ See Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, pp. 41—109, 221—243; *The Growth*, vol. iii, pp. 728—738. ⁶ Nöldeke, *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, ii, p. 131, pointed to the likelihood of a secular tradition co-existing beside the more condensed priestly one; and Markwart, *ZDMG.*, 1895, p. 640, did no more than sketch the possibility of a

I think it can be demonstrated that this view overstresses the part played by priestly learning.

That some secular records, presumably oral, existed in Vištaspā's own day is to be assumed from the fact that we still possess an account, altered and doubtless dignified by the passage of time, of the battles, raids and blood-feuds of his ancestors to the sixth generation. Memories of such exploits are most likely to have been kept alive if enshrined soon after the event in some formal manner; and the nature of the account which has come down to us suggests strongly that its origin is to be traced, not to genealogical tables and antiquarian catalogues (although such doubtless existed at the time), but to a court-poetry of celebration and entertainment, characteristic of a heroic age. Moreover, we are entitled to assume that such poetry was still cultivated in Vištaspā's own time, for the scanty indications that we can glean for this period from Zoroaster's Gāthās are consonant with the characteristics of a still-flourishing heroic age. Thus society appears to have been in a turbulent state, dominated by warlike leaders (the *kavis*) and their followers, who made life harsh and hazardous for the honest man (*ərəzəjī*) and the herdsman (*šuyant*), he and his cattle alike being in peril from the wicked man, who 'finds not a livelihood apart from injury to the cattle and men of the innocent herder' (*yō nōit jyōtūm hanarə vīnastī vāstryehyā aēnaphō pasəuš vīrāatēā adrujyāntō*)¹. The 'bloodthirsty wicked'² give no peace, and the good man must protect himself with a weapon³. Such slight allusions suggest a predatory heroic society⁴ as seen through the eyes of a relatively weak member of it⁵, a prophet, moreover, passionately devoted to justice and good order and creative works, blessings to be attained with difficulty in a swashbuckling age.

connection between later traditions and the Avesta. Christensen, however, insisted in his *Kayanides* (1932) upon the complete dependence of the secular tradition of the Sassanian period on older priestly learning (see pp. 35—41). This view he appears to have modified in *Les Gestes des Rois* (1936), but he nevertheless still seems to have regarded the preservation of 'l'histoire héroïque des temps anté-zoroastriens' (p. 34) as being due to its incorporation in the Yašts (see p. 23). Benveniste also, in his illuminating article on the *Ayādgar-i Zarīrān*, traces the substance of this epic fragment back to 'quelque Yašt disparu' (*JA.*, avril-juin 1932, p. 247). ¹ Y. 31, 15. The translation given here is Maria Wilkins Smith's (see her *Studies in Gathic Syntax*, p. 79). ² Y. 48, 11 (*dragvō.dəbiš xwērāiš*). ³ Y. 31, 18 (*snaiðišā*). ⁴ The original Kayanian heroic society was doubtless materially relatively poor, although we see it now through the trappings of later Arsacid and Sassanian pomp. It probably shared features with, for example, the Irish heroic age, whose contending chieftains, chariot-riders like the Kayanians, occupied themselves largely, when not feasting, with cattle-lifting and head-hunting. ⁵ Y. 29, 9.

Zoroaster's explicit rejection of a life dependent on the sword makes it highly improbable that either he or his immediate followers gave any encouragement to a literature celebrating martial exploits for entertainment. One must assume, therefore, that some time elapsed after his death before the Zoroastrian priests were able to cast the mantle of the faith over the frequently reprehensible doings of Vištaspā's heathen ancestors. That the development was slow is suggested by the fact that in Yašt 13 king Vištaspā is mentioned among the early adherents of the faith (vv. 99—100), whereas his heathen ancestors are introduced independently and considerably later in the liturgy (v. 132). Their mention is brief and wholly within the liturgical convention; and where the *kavis* appear elsewhere in the Yašts¹ it is usually in the formal part of worshippers of the gods, uttering little more than stereotyped formulae. The rare mention of a martial exploit² is brief and allusive, implying a dependancy on a richer and more detailed source; and this can hardly have been other than a secular literature, which must have served to bridge the gap between Zoroaster's death and the church's adoption of these legends. We have no reason to suppose, moreover, that the use of these legends by the priests to enrich and enhance the liturgy, and doubtless (as the Pahlavi books show) to provide material for antiquarian learning and speculation, led to the end of their enjoyment by laymen. The 'heroisation' of an ecclesiastic tradition is an established phenomenon³; but the use of a secular to supply a sacred literature does not imply the death of the former as a separate *genre*. The later representatives of Iranian heroic tradition suggest, moreover, the existence of a continued stream of objective and non-didactic poetry; and it would, indeed, demand much of credulity to suppose that the warlike Iranians abandoned, on conversion to Zoroastrianism, all literature of entertainment and gave themselves wholly and unremittingly to works of devotion.

Fortunately the hypothesis that stories of the Kayanian cycle continued in secular transmission receives confirmation from a considerably later period, namely the Parthian epoch. Evidence exists for the flourishing of a narrative oral literature under the Achaemenians⁴; but proof is lacking for this period of a popular dissemination of the Kayanian legends. Under the Parthians oral literature was evidently still flourishing,

¹ Yt. v 45—51; ix 18—23; xiv 39; xv 31—32; xvii 38—43; xix 71—77, 93.
² Yt. v 50; ix 18, 22; xvii 38, 42; xix 77, 93. ³ Chadwick, *Growth* i, p. 134, points out the many openings that exist for the influence of a heroic upon a non-heroic tradition. ⁴ See Nöldeke, *Grdr. iran. Phil.* ii, pp. 130—134; Christensen, *Les Gestes des Rois*, pp. 107—140.

although writing must have been in regular use at this time for practical purposes¹. There is no evidence, however, that, except for the Greek-speaking members of their community, the Parthians felt there to be any connexion between writing and literature². The specimens of their poetry which have recently been identified³, under later guises, belong to well-established categories of oral literature, and cannot be shown to have been written down before the Sassanian period. Two of them, the *Ayādgar-i Zarīrān* and *Vīs u Rāmīn*, belong to a secular literature of entertainment, the former embodying a fragment from towards the end of the Kayanian cycle as we know it. The interest shown in religion in this epic fragment is strikingly perfunctory, and the material and its handling are very much in the convention of court-poetry⁴. The poem must inevitably have come down to us in a form shorn of some of its old glory⁵; but even in its present state, it is vigorous enough to suggest that it was composed as part of a living tradition. The fact that *Vīs u Rāmīn* appears to have had a contemporary Parthian theme supports this supposition. Evidently the Parthian empire retained enough of the

¹ In proof of this we have the Parthian script itself, evidently a development of the Achaemenian chancery-script; but the instances known to us of its use are still few: the ostraca from Nisa, the Awromān documents, the Ardabān inscription and the inscriptions at Kāl-i Jangāl, a few letters and ostraca from Dura-Europos, and some seal- and coin-legends. The case for an Arsacid Avesta has yet to be established. ² The use of the term 'literature' in such a context is inevitably paradoxical, but no other is available. It is known that writing can be familiar for considerable stretches of time before being adapted to literary uses. In Roman Britain, for example, Latin was evidently written by a fairly large number of people (witness the *graffiti* of workmen discovered in the remains of Romano-British cities); but not one word in the native Celtic language has so far been discovered, and it is probable that, although the Britons were thoroughly familiar with writing, it did not occur to them to adapt it to their own language and literature. ³ See E. Benveniste, 'Le texte du Draxt Asūrik et la versification pehlevi', *J. A.*, oct.-déc. 1930, pp. 193—225; 'Le Mémorial de Zarīr, poème pehlevi mazdēen', *J. A.*, avril-juin 1932, pp. 245—293; W. B. Henning, 'A Pahlavi Poem', *BSOAS.*, xiii, pp. 641—648 (further study of *Draxt Asūrik*); V. Minorsky, 'Vīs u Rāmīn, a Parthian Romance', i, *BSOAS.* xi, pp. 741—763; ii, *ibid.*, xii, pp. 20—35; iii, *ibid.*, xvi, pp. 91—2; a corroborative note on the name Wērōy, Henning, *Asia Major*, *N. S.*, ii, p. 178. ⁴ One can point to the leisurely description of embassy and audience (§4—8), battle-muster and march (23—31), heroic vauntings (55—61), desperate combats (70, 74—5, 83, 105—6), the account of trophies (106), and the mutilated but moving elegy (84—87). ⁵ The experiences of modern collectors of oral literature, such as Radlov, show that it is difficult for a poet used to reciting to a responsive audience to kindle when dictating. One may suppose, therefore, that the *Ayādgar* lost something in being set down, even before the scribal tradition began to corrupt it.

characteristics of a heroic age¹ to encourage still the cultivation of a heroic literature.

The most convincing piece of evidence for the existence of a continuous oral tradition between Kayanian and Sassanian times, through Parthian, lies, however, in the fusing of stories about Arsacid heroes with those of the older epoch. This fact, first noticed in connection with Gudarz², was subsequently established for a whole group of Parthians, including other members of Gudarz' own family³. In discussing the problem of the appearance of these heroes in the legends of the much older Kayanians, Nöldeke suggested that their names might have been introduced when the national legend was fashioned in Sassanian times, at the instigation of their descendants, representatives of the great Arsacid houses which still enjoyed power and prestige at that epoch. The suggestion that the process was a conscious one has been adopted by other scholars⁴. Had

¹ One may instance the independence of the nobility, leading to the persistence of personal loyalties rather than to the development of patriotic ties; the nature of much of the warfare, cavalry-fighting which enabled individual courage and prowess to be shown; and the continued contact in the north-east (the home of the heroic tradition as we possess it) with a bold and vigorous barbarism. ² See H. Rawlinson, *JRG.*, ix (1839), pp. 114—116. ³ See Nöldeke, *Persische Studien*, ii, pp. 29—34 (in *Sb. Wiener Akademie*, 126. Band, 1892); *Grdr. ir. Phil.*, ii, pp. 136—7; Markwart, 'Beiträge zur Geschichte und Sage von Erān', *ZDMG.*, 1895, pp. 628 to 672; 'Iberer und Hyrkanier', *Caucasica*, 9, 1931, pp. 78—113. Markwart goes further than Nöldeke in seeking to trace the influence of Parthian characters and events in shaping the Kayanian legends as we possess them. An attempt at identifying a whole series of events from Parthian history was made, but not perhaps in a sufficiently critical spirit, by J. C. Coyajee in his 'The House of Gotarzes: a chapter of Parthian history' in *JASB.*, 1932, xxviii, no. 10, pp. 207—224. ⁴ Christensen (*Les Kayanides*, p. 128) actively endorsed Nöldeke's suggestion, which was also adopted by Coyajee (see *JASB.*, 1932, pp. 233—4). Minorsky (*BSOAS.*, xii, p. 25) contents himself with calling it 'ingenious'. Markwart does not give it his support, but I cannot find that he put forward another interpretation. He greatly stressed, however, the importance of the evidence provided by these names and legends for the existence of a rich 'saga' literature under the Parthians. In this he was followed by Herzfeld (see *Am Tor von Asien*, p. 47) who put forward on this basis an explanation for the fusion of the stories that can hardly, I think, be seriously entertained: namely, that in Arsacid times 'die Barden an den Höfen der grossen Adelsgeschlechter verlegten die nach den Formen des mythischen Denkens gestalteten Erzählungen gleichzeitiger geschichtlicher Ereignisse in das mythische Altortum jener lebenden Sagen zurück', being thus responsible for the fact that 'die geschichtliche Erinnerung an die Arsakidenzeit so vollständig ausgelöscht ist' (*AMI*, iv, p. 113). That a single court-singer should thus mask his celebration of the deeds of a living prince and patron is fairly hard to accept; a concerted movement towards such obfuscation becomes incredible.

the incorporation been deliberate, however, one would expect it to have been achieved with some circumstance and care. As it is, a group of Parthians, by no means evenly representing the 'great houses'¹, appears with a dream-like abruptness at the court of Kai Kāūs²; they remain, actively participating or providing a background of council, throughout the reigns of the succeeding Kayanians; and although most meet their deaths in fit heroic manner, one of the most glorious of them, Gudarz, is not even formally despatched, but fades unmarked from the scene. This strongly suggests, not a deliberate and politic grafting, but one of the simplifications characteristic of the later stages of a long oral tradition, whereby the poets come to group together the heroes of different cycles and to amalgamate their stories. Striking examples of such a tendency are to be found in other traditions; one may cite the Teutonic tradition, in which historical persons are kept distinct within their own spheres in the oldest poems, such as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and *Waldhere*, or the catalogue-poem *Widsith*, but become entangled and their stories richly confused in the later Icelandic and medieval German versions, such as the thirteenth-century *Völsunga Saga* or the *Nibelungenlied*³. In the late versions of the stories of the British heroic age there is an overwhelming tendency to gather all heroes and their adventures, whatever their epoch or setting, around the person of King Arthur. It has been pointed out that in making such simplifications an oral poet was probably unaware of anachronism, being little concerned with relative chronologies⁴. The method of oral composition often results in each poem being to a certain extent recreated each time it is sung⁵. Differences of language and dialect⁶, custom and country tend in the process gradu-

¹ This was pointed out by Coyajee, *op. cit.*, pp. 222—3; for some critical remarks on the 'great houses' see Henning, *BSOAS.*, xiv, pp. 509—510; Jackson *Memorial Volume* (1954), pp. 50—53. ² See *Šahname* 12, 48—9. ³ Chadwick has shown how in some medieval poems Dietrich von Bern (Theodoric the Ostrogoth) who died in 526, is made the nephew of Ermenrich (Ermenric), his remote ancestor, who died c. 370; banished by his uncle, he takes refuge with Etzel (Attila) who died in 453. 'The result of this confusion is that the same characters are associated with Dietrich and Ermenrich, and indeed come upon the scene in most of the heroic stories.' (*Growth*, i, p. 199.) ⁴ See Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, pp. 27, 29, 522. ⁵ See Chadwick, *Growth*, iii, pp. 867—9. ⁶ Small dialect-traces often remain, however, as in the Homeric poems; Anglian forms can be found in the late West-Saxon dialect in which *Beowulf* is preserved, and it is thus, presumably, that Parthian forms survive in the *Ayādgar*. The freedom with which heroic stories crossed the frontiers of, for example, the different Teutonic languages shows that there is no difficulty in postulating a common oral tradition for the Avestan people, the Achaemenians, Arsacids and Sassanians.

ally to disappear; and poet and listeners are therefore aware of men from times earlier than their own immediate past as the inhabitants of different literary cycles rather than as men of different eras and lands. With a breaking down of tradition their histories can therefore be mingled without much discord, the process being largely one of literary manipulation¹.

It is evident that, as Nöldeke said, the fusion of Kayanian and Parthian heroes must have taken place under the Sassanians, the Arsacid heroes being subordinated to the Kayanian kings. The great Gudarz has been generally identified with Gotarzes II, who flourished in the middle of the first century A. D.² The probability is that the systematizing of the old epic tales in the Sassanian *Khwadāy-nāmak* took place about the sixth century. Tales of Parthian heroes may thus have enjoyed five hundred years or more of oral transmission—an ample time for historical realities to become blurred, and for a blending of the stories with older legends to be readily brought about. For the blending to have taken place, however, the Kayanian cycle must also have been current in secular form, and so fluid enough to absorb the younger stories. A further piece of evidence for the currency of this cycle till late times was provided by Markwart when he pointed out that the lost Pahlavi *Patkār-nāmak* recorded the fight of the Kayanian Spandiyār against the Alans, who did not appear in Iran until the middle of the first century after Christ³.

Corroborative evidence fortunately exists for the cultivation still of a secular oral tradition under the Sassanians, although the impulse behind the creation of heroic narrative was evidently failing. The *Kārnāmak-i*

¹ The similarity in the adventures of Rustam and Isfandiyār provides another example of such manipulation, since, as demonstrated by Nöldeke (*Grdr. ir. Phil.*, ii, p. 168), this similarity is to be treated as a piece of literary emulation rather than as an example of religious rivalry. The heroic tales of Rustam, being devoid of religious affiliations, as the Sogdian fragments conclusively show, provide an admirable example of a secular oral transmission, almost certainly from a pre-Christian era. ² See Markwart, *ZDMG.*, 1895, pp. 641—2; Herzfeld, '*Sakastan*', *AMI.*, iv, (1932), pp. 45—116; *Arch. History of Iran* (1934), pp. 56—57. The house of Gudarz is not known from Sassanian times, and the reason for its prominence in the epic is obscure. Its association with the north-east of Iran, the home of the epic tradition, has been suggested as a cause. There is also the possibility that this family were simply fortunate in having poets who showed unusual skill in celebrating their exploits. ³ See Markwart, *ZDMG.*, 1895, p. 639; *Caucasica*, 9, p. 87, where he points out that the *Patkār-nāmak* was 'kein Originalepos, wie das Zarērbuch, sondern eine Sammlung verschiedener Epen'. In the same place he produces further evidence to show that 'Spandijād im östlichen Kaukasus ein seit sehr alter Zeit gefeierter Held war'.

Ardašīr is a last representative of a long tradition, as the similarities between the story of *Ardašīr*'s birth and that of Cyrus suggest¹. This is a creation of the Sassanian epoch itself. That other stories too were current for oral entertainment is suggested by the *Šahname*, where songs² of royal battles and feasts are represented as a source of pleasure in court and village³. Books are also mentioned, however, as providing instruction and diversion for kings⁴; and once the challenge of a written literature, with its variety and originality, began to be felt, the day of the splendid but conventional heroic poetry was bound to be near its end.

The ecclesiastical and the secular oral literatures appear both to have been committed, in part at least, to writing during the Sassanian period; and one has only to study the surviving representatives of the former, as for example the *Bundahišn*, to be convinced that the dry antiquarian learning there displayed, together with a strong spirit of didacticism, could never have provided the inspiration for a literature of entertainment. One must suppose, however, that the 'national' tradition, fashioned artificially in the Sassanian period out of the old individualistic epics, owed a great deal to priestly speculation for its systematization and its chronological details.

To postulate the existence in Iran of a secular oral literature of entertainment that flourished in unbroken continuity for about a thousand years is not to strain credulity. Other literatures have had a very long existence in oral transmission; and the remarkable fact about the Iranian tradition is less its length than that a date can be supplied, through the link with Zoroaster, for so early a cycle of stories within it.

¹ See Gutschmid, *Kleine Schriften*, iii, p. 133f.; Nöldcke, *Grdr. ir. Phil.*, ii, p. 132.

² All representatives of the genuinely old oral literature known to us from Iran are poetic; and the probability is that the Iranians, like the Teutonic and Greek peoples, enjoyed a predominantly poetic oral tradition, in contrast with the prose oral literatures of, for example, the Irish and the Polynesians. ³ See *Šahname* 35, 461; 35, 1104—5.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 35, 317; 42, 1710—12; 43, 58—59; 43, 97.

SERTA CANTABRIGIENSIA

VIRIS DOCTISSIMIS CLARISSIMISQUE QUI A DIE
XXI USQUE AD DIEM XXVIII MENSIS AUGUSTI ANNI
MCMLIV AD XXIII CONGRESSUM INTERNATIONALEM
REBUS LITTERISQUE ORIENTALIBUS DEDICATUM
CANTABRIGIAM CONVENERUNT

DONUM PRAEBUIT

FRANCISCUS STEINER · AQUIS MATTIACIS
A. D. MCMLIV